

**"Oscar Wilde," *Kansas City Daily Journal* (Kansas City, MO), 18 Apr. 1882, 2**

His Lecture in the City Last Evening on "Decorative Art."

A BORE TO THE PUBLIC.

How He Appeared on the Stage—A Talk With the Man.

✂ *An account of Wilde's lecture in Kansas City.*

OSCAR TALKS.

"Oscar Wilde and servant, of Ireland," was the entry in the Coates house register which attracted the attention of a JOURNAL representative yesterday afternoon. His card was at once sent up to "parlor 3," and presently the pleasing intelligence was returned that "Mr. Wilde would receive the gentleman; would he please step up to the room." He would, and following the attendant the timid youth was ushered into the presence of the great apostle of the beautiful, who arose from a reclining position upon a divan to greet his visitor. After shaking hands with the worshipper of decorative art, the reporter was invited to take a seat. The poet presents a great contrast to the descriptions which have been published of him.

In fact, he is anything but the consumptive being which has been caricatured in the East. Upon the reporter's entrance he closed a volume of Warder's poems, sent him during the day, which he spoke of being charming.<sup>1</sup>

"How do you like our Western country, Mr. Wilde?" asked the reporter, after the first greeting.

"Oh, I am delighted with its beauties and find something every day to interest me," said the poet, speaking rapidly with rather broad accent. "Everything is new, the people, their ways and the country, all possess interesting characteristics for study. California, with its beautiful scenery, was especially delightful, and I had charming audiences, so large and appreciative, and continued so throughout the entire four lectures which I delivered in San Francisco[.] I like the West—the people seem to be simpler and more readily understand than in the East. Now this state presents landscape so much more attractive than the sandy stretch of country between here, and Denver."<sup>2</sup> I had a splendid

1. Warder: see *The Complete Interviews*, p. 353, note 1.

2. The Coates House Hotel was on the Missouri side of the Kansas-Missouri border. By 'this state', Wilde must be referring to Kansas, through which he had just travelled on his return from California. He cannot be referring to a previous visit to Missouri, as his westward route was not via that state.

reception, there, too. The audience was so cultured and refined and gave such close attention. My audiences have been delightful.”

“What will be the subject of your lecture here?”

“My lecture will be more particularly on the subject of ‘Decorative Art,’ although all my lectures are upon the general subject of ‘English Renaissance,’ and where I only lecture once, I always give my attention especially to the decorative arts—the art of beautifying home. This is all that needs encouragement. Painting and poetry need no encouragement, people love them by nature, and adore them as naturally as the bird sings. America’s grand poets, Edgar Allen Poe, Longfellow, Bryant and Hawthorne, will live always, and people do not need to be asked to love them.<sup>1</sup> No, it is the neglected arts of decorating that must be encouraged. By bringing the subject of the beautiful before the people we raise to a higher plane the handicraft of the mechanic the worker in fabrics, stones and metals [*sic*].<sup>2</sup> We would make the texture finer and the figures more beautiful in the first; the lines more graceful and flowing in the second; and in the last a greater artistic finish, and so in everything, calling for the same culture in their production as in the higher branches of art. I give my life to the study and spread of art; there are only three things which interest me deeply, and they are divine; beauty of women, beauty of art, and of beauty nature [*sic*]. I find much that excites my curiosity, but nothing which can surpass the study of the beautiful.”

“What did you think of your reception in Boston?”

“That is a fair question,” exclaimed the poet, as he leaned back upon the divan and laughed heartily. “I can hardly say, however, that I have had a fair opportunity of judging a Boston audience. You remember the lark of those Harvard students—forty of them, who came in a body with sunflowers and lilies. Well, of course, that excited the audience, and they were eager and impatient to hear how I would receive this demonstration. But it ended in the usual way of the rash man who put his head in the lion’s mouth,” and he laughed again. “I had all the advantage, I could talk and they were compelled to remain silent. I shall lecture there again on my return trip.”<sup>3</sup>

“Have you received much annoyance from visitors or newspapers?”

“Oh, no! If I do not wish to see visitors I don’t see them, that’s all. I have had a number of callers today, but you are the first one I have admitted. I was very much fatigued and needed rest. I shall leave my card at Maj. Warder’s in exchange for his. I feel grateful to him for his charming poem to me. The newspapers, of course, publish annoy-

1. William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878) was an American poet and journalist. Wilde would later gloss Bryant as one ‘who used to be thought an important poet when America had none’ (The Pall Mall Gazette, 18 Jul. 1889, 3; CW vii, No. 161, lines 16–17). Bryant’s translation of *The Odyssey* was, in Wilde’s opinion, ‘dreadful’ (The Pall Mall Gazette, 26 Apr. 1887, 5; CW vi, No. 65, line 26).

2. There appears to be an error in the preceding sentence. As the next sentence reveals, Wilde intended to refer to three groups.

3. For the Harvard incident, see *The Complete Interviews*, p. 134, note 2. Wilde lectured on *The Decorative Arts* at Boston’s Globe Theatre on 2 June.

ing burlesques, but they do not worry me. I read them all. It has one effect, and that is, it takes about ten minutes after appearance on the stage to dispel and clear away the mists concerning myself.”

“How soon will you return to England, and will you lecture there?”

“I can’t possibly say when I shall return. I have several pressing invitations to spend the summer in this country. Henry Ward Beecher has invited me to spend a few months at his villa upon the Hudson, and Julian Hawthorne has kindly urged me to pay a visit to his home and view the scenes and surroundings amid which his father worked.<sup>1</sup> Both of these invitations I shall accept. As to lecturing, I think I shall most assuredly go upon the platform upon my return to England. But do you know that I lectured in New York the first time I ever appeared as a public speaker? The press have criticised my method almost universally. Now I am not a stump speaker and do not wave my hands and clinch [*sic*] my fists at every semi-colon, but I feel that I have something of interest to say and have an intense desire to say it. My experiences have been delightful and I haven’t suffered in the least from embarrassment. My first audience was composed of 3,000 people and I felt encouraged to go—if the house had been empty benches the result might have been different. I do not think there is a household in England but what has been influenced by our art, and I believe that in time it will be the same in America.”

In conclusion Mr. Wilde spoke of the rapid growth of Kansas City, and laughing said, that cities were built in this country in the same length of time that it took to build houses in England.

1. Julian Hawthorne (1846–1934) was an American novelist and journalist and the son of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne. He and Wilde met in London in 1879. Wilde appears to have received an invitation from Hawthorne’s wife to visit the couple at their New England farm house in February, by which time he was about to embark on a tour of the Midwest; he asked if he could visit in April (CL, 138). Hawthorne would claim after Wilde’s death that he did not answer this request (Scharnhorst, G. (2009) Oscar Wilde and Julian Hawthorne, *The Wildean*, 35, 16–19). The present interview, however, suggests that Wilde was still expecting to visit the Hawthornes at some point that summer.